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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
12 May 1985

British spy won promotions despite his erratic behavior

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LONDON — When he was convicted last year of trying to pass secrets to the Soviets, Michael John Bettaney was considered just another British spy whose story read like an international spy thriller.

It may have made good reading, but Bettaney's story — as detailed in the report of a special commission released late last week — made for bad government.

The four-member commission was charged by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to investigate the circumstances of Bettaney's case before he was convicted and sentenced to 23 years in prison at a five-day trial in April 1984 that was held almost exclusively in secret.

The commission found that Bettaney, a middle-ranking officer of MI5 — Britain's top counterespionage service — had a heavy drinking problem and showed the kind of strange social behavior that should have been dealt with by his superiors.

Instead, Bettaney was given several promotions and cleared the regular security check even though some of his colleagues reported that while very drunk at parties he would say things such as, "I'm working for the wrong side," and, "Come and see me in my dacha when I retire."

The 34-page report not only criticized MI5 for its handling of Bettaney's case, but suggested that management within the security system was inflexible, resistant to change and unresponsive to personnel problems.

Thatcher, in releasing the report to the House of Commons on Thursday, said that she has ordered the new director-general of MI5 to investigate the criticisms and to tighten up its own security procedures.

But Thatcher's pledge unleashed a storm of criticism in the Parliament, even from members of her own party, who said



Sketch of Michael John Bettaney
Jailed for trying to pass secrets

that MI5 should be reviewed by an independent ombudsman. "Something is rotten in the conduct of the British security system," said the Times of London in a long editorial Friday.

The commission interviewed 60 people to compile the most complete record of Bettaney's bizarre story. Born in central England in 1950 to parents who were factory workers, Bettaney went to Oxford and joined MI5 in 1975. He was, as the British say, "positively vetted" — meaning that his background was thoroughly checked and deemed acceptable.

He gradually rose through the ranks, until by the end of 1982 he was in a counterespionage section dealing with the Soviets in the United Kingdom. At the same time, however, he decided to offer himself to the Soviets as an agent and attempted to contact Arkady Gouk, whom he believed to be a senior officer of the KGB attached to the Soviet Embassy in London.

Three times — in April, June and July 1982 — Bettaney delivered letters to Gouk making the offer, included some secret information to indicate his credentials and suggested ways they could secretly communicate. Gouk did not respond.

Undeterred, Bettaney continued to collect information in his home that he hoped to eventually pass along to the Soviets until he finally was arrested in

September 1983. His post-sentence appeal was dismissed in November 1984.

While all this was happening, however, Bettaney had a severe drinking problem that began in 1976 and continued on and off until his conviction, the report said. "The fact that Bettaney was drinking to excess was known to his superiors before" he was given his first promotion in 1980, the report said.

One example cited by the commission was a report from a colleague of Bettaney's described as Mrs. X. After a party in 1981, she and her husband offered to drive home Bettaney and his female companion. He was very drunk and was so abusive to her that she asked to be taken home, Mrs. X said.

"When dropped at her home, the young woman got out and ran away," the report said. "Bettaney got out of the car and tried to run after her, but was barely able to stand. Smoke was issuing from a lighted pipe in his pocket."

Mrs. X notified her superiors of the incident, and her report was passed along to the personnel branch. But Bettaney was never questioned by his superiors about the incident.

A month later, Bettaney was arrested for public drunkenness and became violent at the police station. He pleaded guilty, was fined, and then offered to resign from MI5. His resignation was not accepted, but an MI5 doctor who then examined him said that Bettaney admitted to drinking the equivalent of almost a bottle of liquor daily.

The commission also said that another set of colleagues had formally reported what they regarded as Bettaney's strange behavior: heavy drunkenness at parties, boasting about working for the Soviets, and asking questions of others at work about extremely sensitive security matters outside his own particular responsibilities.